

# Time to Take Asia Seriously

**Farooq Sobhan, Bangladesh's candidate for the post of Secretary General of the Commonwealth, talks to Sabir Mustafa and Toufique Imrose Khalidi**



SINCE its establishment the Commonwealth has had three Secretary Generals. The first was the Canadian Sir Arnold Smith. He served two five-year terms from 1965 to 75. He basically came through consensus. Next came Sir Sridath Ramphal who was elected unopposed in '75. At the Lusaka summit in '79, Ramphal comfortably won against his Indian challenger. In '83 summit at New Delhi, Indira Gandhi proposed to make Ramphal Secretary General for a third term, which was unanimously agreed to by the heads of government. At the Kuala Lumpur summit in '89, Chief Emeka Anyaoku of Nigeria was elected.

The Commonwealth summit in Cyprus held in 1993 decided that the term for the next Secretary General would be for a four-year period and would be limited to two terms. They further decided that the term of the next Secretary General would begin from January 1 of the year 2000. The new Secretary General would be elected at the Commonwealth summit which will take place in 1999. It will be in November of 1999 in Durban in South Africa.

For the 1999 election, Bangladesh has nominated Farooq Sobhan as its candidate. A career diplomat, the 58-year old Oxonian is currently the executive chairman of the Board of Investment. Sobhan reached the pinnacle of his 33-year long career in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1995 when he served as Foreign Secretary before retiring in 1997. Sobhan said in an interview given to The Daily Star, this is one of the best chances Bangladesh has had in winning a leadership position at a major international organisation. Following are excerpts from the interview:

**DAILY STAR (DS): There is still a long way to go before the next Secretary General is elected. What kind of effort the government is expected to undertake to secure the election of Bangladesh's candidate?**

**FAROOQ SOBHAN (FS):** Yes, there is a year to go. It will be announced in April next year. Already we've been lobbying now for seven months and so has the Foreign Minister of New Zealand. So both of us have been in the field.

Lobbying is done in many ways. Obviously the Foreign Minister and the Foreign Minister will play the lead role. But since it is an election where Presidents and Prime Ministers are directly involved, this is the one election in the world where the Prime Minister or President is required to vote or pass the ballot. So it is important for

them to know the candidate. The Secretary General traditionally works very closely with the heads of state of the respective governments. So traditionally they take a keen interest in the election, who is being elected and who is not. So our Prime Minister is, without question, a major player. In fact, in a sense, she is required to be very actively involved in the process.

So what I have been doing is travelling as a special envoy, carrying a letter addressed to the counterparts, Presidents, Prime Ministers, travelling around Asia and Africa and am now going to the Caribbean. But then in this election what is important is networking. So we work as I am with Mr. Don McKinnon of New Zealand is also seeking the help of important personalities in the Commonwealth who carry influence, prestige, and see if they can also be prevailed upon to support one or the other candidate. So Bangladesh is also trying to mobilise some noteworthy personalities in the Commonwealth who we hope will support us.

**DS:** Has the government mobilised the country's missions abroad in support of your candidature? Which countries hold the key to the election?

**FS:** Unfortunately, we don't have all that many embassies or High Commissions in Commonwealth countries. There are 54 Commonwealth member states. I am saying 54 although Nigeria at the moment is suspended, but it is now pretty much understood that Nigeria will be reinstated as a full member in the near future. It's just a matter of time. So 54 member states. In all, we have resident High Commissioners in 12 Commonwealth countries. So 12 out of 24. We have some concurrent accreditation like our mission in New York looks after two Caribbean countries. So what this means is that we will certainly have to try and send people to those countries where we don't have missions or get the neighbouring High Commissioners to visit those countries.

Our Foreign Minister has addressed letters to his counter-

parts also. He has also written to all our missions, asking them to do some lobbying. In Durban, at the NAM summit, in New York during the General Assembly, he has of course spoken to his counterparts. In Durban between the Foreign Minister and myself, we must have met. I'd say at least 30 Presidents or Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers from the Commonwealth. We were in particular focusing on the Africans because the Africans constitute the largest group within the Commonwealth. There are 19 African countries, so whoever can get the lion's share of Africa is obviously well ahead in the race.

The second most important group is the Caribbean group. There are 12 Caribbean countries. And what is important is the Caribbean's equivalent to SAARC try and tend to take common positions on important issues. So there is a strong possibility that they may try and take a common position on the post of Commonwealth Secretary General.

**DS:** Given that heads of governments determine policy of the Commonwealth, do you see much role for the Secretary General in political matters within or between member states?

**FS:** The Secretary General is now expected to use his good offices even to resolve or try and resolve political disputes within the members states, between the parties, between the government and the opposition. Of course, there is a very important matter here when he uses his offices. That is he must be invited to do so by both sides. The incumbent Secretary General has done so. He used his good offices role recently in Tanzania, in Zanzibar when there was a problem between the government of Zanzibar and the opposition. A senior official of the Commonwealth spent several weeks in Zanzibar and Dar us Salaam trying to mediate and reach an understanding and assist all the parties to resolve the problems peacefully within a democratic framework. So the Secretary is certainly using his good office's role more and more.

I recall I went to see the Secretary General in November last year. That was about the time when the crisis in Pakistan, between Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and President Leghari was taking place. The Secretary General actually went to Pakistan on that occasion. This was really a problem between the President and the Prime Minister and he was kept to be of help. The Secretary General took a very important initiative in Africa in 1996, looking at the whole issue of democracy in Africa, building democratic institutions and so on.

The Commonwealth has a very important role in free and fair elections and building up democratic institutions. So this is now very much a part of the evolving agenda of the Commonwealth and the role of the Secretary General.

**DS:** How important is it that you are representing an Asian country? Does the fact that a developing country has nominated you carry any significance in the Commonwealth election politics?

**FS:** This is really the heart and soul of our tactics, that we have been going around Africa. This has had a big impact on Africa and we hope it will have an equally big impact in the Caribbean. We have said that, in the 45 years that this secretariat has existed, we have never had an Asian Secretary General. They have been really representing this very elite group of developed old Commonwealth member states. It even started off by having the first Secretary General was from there. Then you followed it by having someone from the Caribbean and now you have an African. We never had an Asian though we account for two thirds of the population of the Commonwealth.

We, the South Asians, are without question, a very important component. Surely the time has come to have an Asian Secretary General. And surely the Commonwealth, given the fact that the Secretariat is already so heavily tilted in favour of the developed countries, will want to have a Secretary General from a developing country to maintain some degree of bal-

ance between the developed and the developing countries at the Secretariat. Otherwise, how do you create a sense of participation, belonging in this organisation? It is our organisation as well. If they want us to take the Commonwealth seriously, it is important then that the Commonwealth takes us seriously. We feel we have as much ability and qualifications and certainly interest and enthusiasm to help the organisation. We have provided a candidate for Secretary General in that spirit.

I have spoken to many African heads and they responded very positively. They said, look at the agenda of the Commonwealth. It is good governance, human rights, building up democracy and democratic institutions, upholding the rule of law and promoting trade and industry. That, in a nutshell, is the agenda of the Commonwealth today. And in some ways it could be an agenda that is quite intrusive. Are you better off promoting that agenda as a Secretary General from a developed country or from a developing country because that agenda is not for Britain, Canada or Australia. That agenda has been designed for Asia, Africa and the Caribbean.

So we really have a better empathy and understanding of the problems of other developing countries, other fellow developing countries. We would be much more sensitive to their problems and needs than someone of a developed country. Apart from that, I would think, maybe for a Secretary General from a developed country going to an African country or even a Caribbean country and trying to play his good office's role, would be more difficult than it would be for another developing country. We have seen Ramphal playing this role quite effectively and given a chance, we could also play that role effectively. We don't need someone from the developed world to come in and advise us on how to run our affairs.

**DS:** Given the rationale you have just presented, how do you see the developed countries in the Commonwealth responding to your candidature?

**FS:** I can certainly say that in Britain and Canada, they have responded very positively. I spent a week in Canada and met the Foreign Minister. I met Claire Short and officials of the Foreign Office in Britain. I would say there was a lot of understanding. I would say that when we spoke to them about our candidature, they encouraged us to go forward, to lobby actively. I think what is very important is to really see how much support we can pull up. They said that all these arguments are very powerful arguments.

Their concern is, particularly since they are major contributors to the Commonwealth, they would like to see the Commonwealth taken seriously. They want to get good value for money. They want to see the Commonwealth as a credible organisation which is of service to the member states. They see this as an organisation which provides a good network, linkages and the word which is emphasised most by them is the word 'family'. It's a family where we use informal contacts and relationships particularly at the highest level to promote better relations and facilitate trade and industry which has now become very important on the Commonwealth agenda.

**DS:** Where does Australia stand?

**FS:** Australia has already declared its support for the New Zealand candidate. We must understand the reality that the New Zealand candidate is a sitting Foreign Minister. He's been Foreign Minister for nearly nine years. Before that he held other important offices. He is very well-known in the Commonwealth. He has very close personal links with the Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers in the Commonwealth. Then there is also what I would call the issue of bilateral relations. New Zealand and Aus-

tralia traditionally have very close bilateral relations.

We were told by the Australians that even though we have a highest regard for your candidature, the reality is that there is a New Zealander running in the race. It is almost impossible for Australia not to support him. So they will support New Zealand and we would I suppose, to some extent, understand that as the logical reaction just as we would expect fellow Asians, and hopefully beyond Asia, Africa and fellow Caribbean countries, would be inclined to support us. We are Asian, we are developing, we share the same problems and similar aspirations.

**DS:** How strong is the possibility of India putting up a candidate of its own?

**FS:** We are only two candidates in this race -- New Zealand's Foreign Minister and myself. We have been hearing for the past year about the possibility of an Indian candidate because the Indians have a sit-

friendly relations. That is a natural and logical expectation. Just as New Zealand would expect Australia to support them we would expect India and Pakistan and Sri Lanka and Maldives to support us and equally so, Singapore and Malaysia and Brunei to also support us. It is our logical and most obvious expectation.

**DS:** In the emerging global order, where the UN, the World Bank, IMF and World Trade Organisation are playing pivotal roles in matters of security, development, trade etc., how relevant is the Commonwealth?

**FS:** I would sense five or six niche areas where the Commonwealth has carved out special roles for itself which is quite distinct and, in a sense, quite unique compared to any other existing international organisation. We can go back to the idea of the Commonwealth organisation and where this organisation has gone. Central to this whole theme of the Commonwealth as an organisation was the fact that Britain and its former colonies have a historical relationship. Because of that relationship, there were many ties that bound Britain with its former colonies, ties which go back to subjects like education, the legal system, the form and nature of government and trade. It would make sense if Britain and these colonies gave form and substance to these ties as these countries become independent and find their own place in the world. That is how the concept of the Commonwealth evolved. Central to the idea of this theme was the Commonwealth and its members being like one large family.

What the Commonwealth allowed particularly in its early days, and also even today, is the opportunity for the Prime Ministers and Presidents to interact with each other at least once every other year to develop a kind of personal relationship which we found very useful. In those days it was possible, even as it is now, to pick up your phone and talk to each other on a personal basis and I think that was certainly very important for many countries. So there is this very special intimacy, the family dimension. You are bound by a common language. Every one knows English. You are bound by a British heritage, the legal system, the nature of the bureaucracy, the establishments, etc. And then there were these linkage born through the fact that many of the Commonwealth leaders were educated in British type educational systems and that was a pretty powerful link at that

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ting Deputy Secretary General, but we consulted the Indians, as we did all the SAARC nations, and we have urged them all to support us. We feel that since the Indians this time have occupied the post of Deputy Secretary General and indeed on previous occasions have occupied the post of Deputy Secretary General and Assistant Secretary General.

The post of ASG no longer exists, because instead of having a Deputy Secretary General and Assistant Secretary General, they have changed it and have three Deputy Secretary Generals.

Previously India had two Deputies and one Assistant. So almost from the time of the establishment of the Secretariat, there has been an Indian in a high-ranking position of the Secretariat. In that sense, we've never had a Bangladeshi occupy that kind of profile within the Commonwealth. So we made a request to India, particularly since it was known that there would be a very strong candidate from New Zealand. In order to offset the challenge of the New Zealander, we felt that it was important and essential for Asia to put forward one candidate. India has still not put forward a candidate, but we are still waiting for action to be taken to present a common candidate from Asia.

**DS:** How hopeful are you about getting Indian support for your candidature?

**FS:** I would hope that the fact that I was High Commissioner to India and that I worked very hard in promoting and strengthening Bangladesh relations, that would eventually get the Indians to back my candidature. But what the Indians have conveyed to us is that they have still not taken a final decision on whether they will float their own candidate or not. So until the take that decision, they will not then be in a position to say that they will support x or y in this race for the Secretary General. We naturally assume that if they don't put forward their own candidate, they will support a fellow Asian country, a fellow South Asian country, a close neighbour with whom they have

time. So that was one very important element.

The second very important element about the Commonwealth which makes it very different from any of the other international organisations, is the fact that it has this enormous level, both at the inter-government level and at the non-government level. The Commonwealth has literally hundreds of organisations. The Commonwealth Education Ministers' Meet, the Law Ministers' Meet, the Information Ministers' Meet, the Finance Ministers' Meet, virtually in all disciplines they have an interaction in the Commonwealth. Again, there are obvious historical roots. Commonwealth Education Ministers meet because they have common heritage. Then there are these interactions at a non-government level. You have the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Commonwealth Press Meet and so on and so forth.

The Commonwealth has designed and developed a programme which is unique. This is something that came out at the Edinburgh conference. This is in the area of trade and investment, through activating the private sector. The Commonwealth has taken a number of very important initiatives. This predates Edinburgh because this has been developing within the Commonwealth. This includes helping Commonwealth countries cope with globalisation, trying to attract foreign investment, making them more competitive, developing linkages. The Commonwealth Business Forum has now become an integral part of this process. Recently Lord Cairns came to Dhaka. He happens to be not only the Chairman of the Commonwealth Development Cooperation, but is also the Chairman of the Commonwealth Business Council. They recently held a meeting of the Commonwealth Business Forum in Ottawa. They have invited the Prime Minister to the next Commonwealth Business Forum meeting in February. I have also been invited.

**DS:** Thank you for your time.

## The Month in Review

### Justice Done

Fifteen ex-army officers were sentenced to death on Nov by District and Session Judge Kazi Golam Rasul, for their involvement in the murder of Bangabandhu and his family members. He said that this would be done in public by a firing squad, but if this is impossible, the traditional rule shall be maintained and they will be hanged. Out of the 19 accused, 4 were acquitted with the benefit of doubt.

The fifteen sentenced were: Syed Faruk Rahman, Shahrier Rashid Khan, Muhiuddin Ahmed, Khondokar Abdur Rashid, Mohammad Bajul Huda, SHSB Noor Chowdhury, Shariful Haq Dalim, Abdul Aziz Pasha, SA Rashed Chowdhury, AKM Mohiuddin Ahmed, Najmul Hossain Ansari, Abdul Majed, Reesalder Moslem Uddin, Ahmed Sharful Hassan and Kismat Hashem. However, out of them only Faruk, Shahrier, Muhiuddin and Bajul Huda are here. The rest are all in hiding.

The four acquitted were: Teheruddin Thakur, Abdul Wahab Jowardar, Marfat Ali and Abdul Hashem Mridha.

The verdict brought to trial the murderers who got away on the night of 15th August, 1975. The verdict brought back justice to this barren state.

### Oxy in Business

US Company Occidental began test production in the Jalalabad gas field on the 18th of November.

Occidental would start supplying 100 million cubic feet of gas per day (mmcf) to the national grid from late December — the first fruitful outcome from an Occidental effort.

Different gas fields are currently producing around 800 mmcf of gas, but there is a shortfall of 200 mmcf against demand.

Occidental will be supplying the Jalalabad gas from four wells. Each of the wells would initially supply 25 mmcf of gas through the 24 km pipe line to the national grid. The production will later be increased to 200 mmcf. This Jalalabad Gas field is expected to remain active for 15 years.

The price of this gas would be around 1.8 dollars per unit. This gas would be purchased by Petrobangla in dollars and sold locally at 1.1 dollars — subsidising the loss.

The Jalalabad gas field was originally drilled by Scimitar, a foreign company that was sued by the government for misappropriation of funds and forgery of official documents in the early 90s. Occidental started re-drilling of Scimitar's wells which were left sealed and completed the drillings earlier this year.

### Fireworks from Heaven

The trade fair grounds at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar came alive with people in the early hours of 18th November to experience the magic of meteors showering on Earth. The two telescopes were hardly adequate, yet all waited patiently for their turn to look at the meteors from the Temple-Tutte comet.

When the first meteor descended at 12:30 am, the crowd jumped and cheered in ecstasy the star gazers counted 26 of them by 2:40 am.

The occasions, however, held disappointment for those who had no telescopes. Only a few 'shooting star's could be seen. One such disappointed person commented, "If you keep looking at the sky for hours, you would see these everyday!"

### No Hartal, AL Promises

In a major political development, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina declared on Nov 15 that her party, Awami League, would never call hartal, even if it returned to the opposition.

"I am making this announcement unilaterally both as the Prime Minister and the President of Awami League," she said.

The PM's unconditional announcement came on the heels of a major opposition BNP's 60-hour hartal enforced across the country from November 9.

Justifying the past hartals called by Awami League while in the opposition, Hasina said those hartals were to establish people's rights. She feels that there is no need to call hartal now.

"We do politics for the people and we have no hesitation in taking any decision for the people's welfare," she said.

"We have established the truth that the people are the only source of power to change the government, through ballot," the PM said.

### Clinton Pays

President Bill Clinton has agreed to pay Paula Jones 850,000 dollars to drop her sexual harassment lawsuit — with no apology or admission of guilt — ending the four year legal battle that spurred the impeachment proceedings against him.

### FDI Hits Record

Global foreign direct investment is set to hit a record this year despite the Asian financial crisis and slower world economic growth, the 1998 World Investment Report released Nov 11 said.

Inward foreign direct investment (FDI) — such as factories and equipment built by multinational firms — jumped 19% to \$400 billion in 1997. The total could reach 430-440 billion dollars in 1998.

The only thing that could affect this scenario would be an aggravation of the crisis in the world economy and a drying up of liquidity leaving firms unable to find credit to fund foreign investment. Most of the projected FDI rise is likely to be focused in industrial countries, Latin America and eastern and central Europe.

Asia, many of whose economies plunged into recession last year, nevertheless posted an 8% rise in FDI to an all-time high of \$87 billion in the 12-month period.

The World Investment Report 1998: Trends and Determinants reported, "Least developed countries (LDCs) that received higher inflows in 1997 included Bangladesh because of recent discoveries of natural gas."

Bangladesh's FDI inflow was 145 million dollars in 1997, 10 times higher than 14 million in 1996. "FDI inflow in Bangladesh has increased manifold. It has drawn attention from UNCTAD," said an UN envoy, hoping further rise in FDI inflows in coming years.

### Four Dead in Hartal

Three days of hartal called by the BNP Nov 9-11 saw the death of four people: Omar Faruk, 16, a renege factory worker, Abdus Salam, 30, a hawker, Mohammad Islam, a pedestrian, Arshadul Huq, 25, a rickshawpuller.

A total of 450 people were hurt — either assaulted, bullet hit, victimised or caught in the crossfire. Newsmen were among the injured. They included Shaifuddin Bitu of Inqilab, Suhani of Ittefaq, Tarif of The Independent, Shamim of Akjer Kagaj, Anis and Amran Hossain of The Daily Star.

Inter-city buses remained off the roads. Railway communication was also disrupted, although for four hours only on the last day (Dhaka-Chittagong). In the capital, rickshaws and a few auto-rickshaws and auto-tempos were seen plying, more on the last day than on the previous days. Educational institutions remained closed while transactions in financial institutions were poor. Shopping complexes and markets were shuttered. However, groceries, medicine shops, kitchen markets and restaurants remained open. Life was paralysed as most economic activities came to a halt.

Violence was also reported from Sylhet, Bhola, Comilla, Sherpur, Mymensingh. The police arrested 546 people from various parts of the city altogether, including Habibun Nabi Sohel, General Secretary of BNP's student front JCD.

### Sharif Slams Sindh

PAKISTANI'S Prime Minister suspended civil rights in a southern province and ordered the army to quell violence in the port city of Karachi on the 20th. Nawaz Sharif called in the army to aid government and set up military courts in the port city of Karachi to try those behind the factional violence.

Sharif last month dismissed the elected provincial government of Sindh after widespread political violence killed more than 1,000 people in Karachi this year which shunned economic activities.

Human rights groups and opposition parties said Sharif's move was unconstitutional and threatened democracy.

Two Concerts Goers Stabbed to Death:

Two students were stabbed to death and two others were injured outside the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium at Mirpur on the night of the 20th.

The incident took place when an open air concert to raise funds for the flood victims organised by Joy Bangla Sangeritrik Oikya, was going on inside the stadium.

The dead were Rimon, 18, a first year student of BCIC Science College, and Imrul Moni Akhtar, 17, a first year student of Adomjee Cantonment Public School and College. They died on their way to DMCH.

### Taslina Gets a Breather

A Division Bench of the High Court granted writer Taslima Nasreen an interim bail on the 22nd, when she emerged from hiding and appeared before the court.

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The Commonwealth, for example, has set up a ministerial level group which was set up to look into violation of human rights or look into issues such as the return to democracy in